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RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOK

Managing Correspondence

GUIDE

LETTERS

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

RECORDS MANAGEMENT DIVISION

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RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOKS are developed by the National Archives and Records Service as technical guides to reducing and simplifying Government paperwork.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT HANDBOOKS:

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CORRESPONDEX
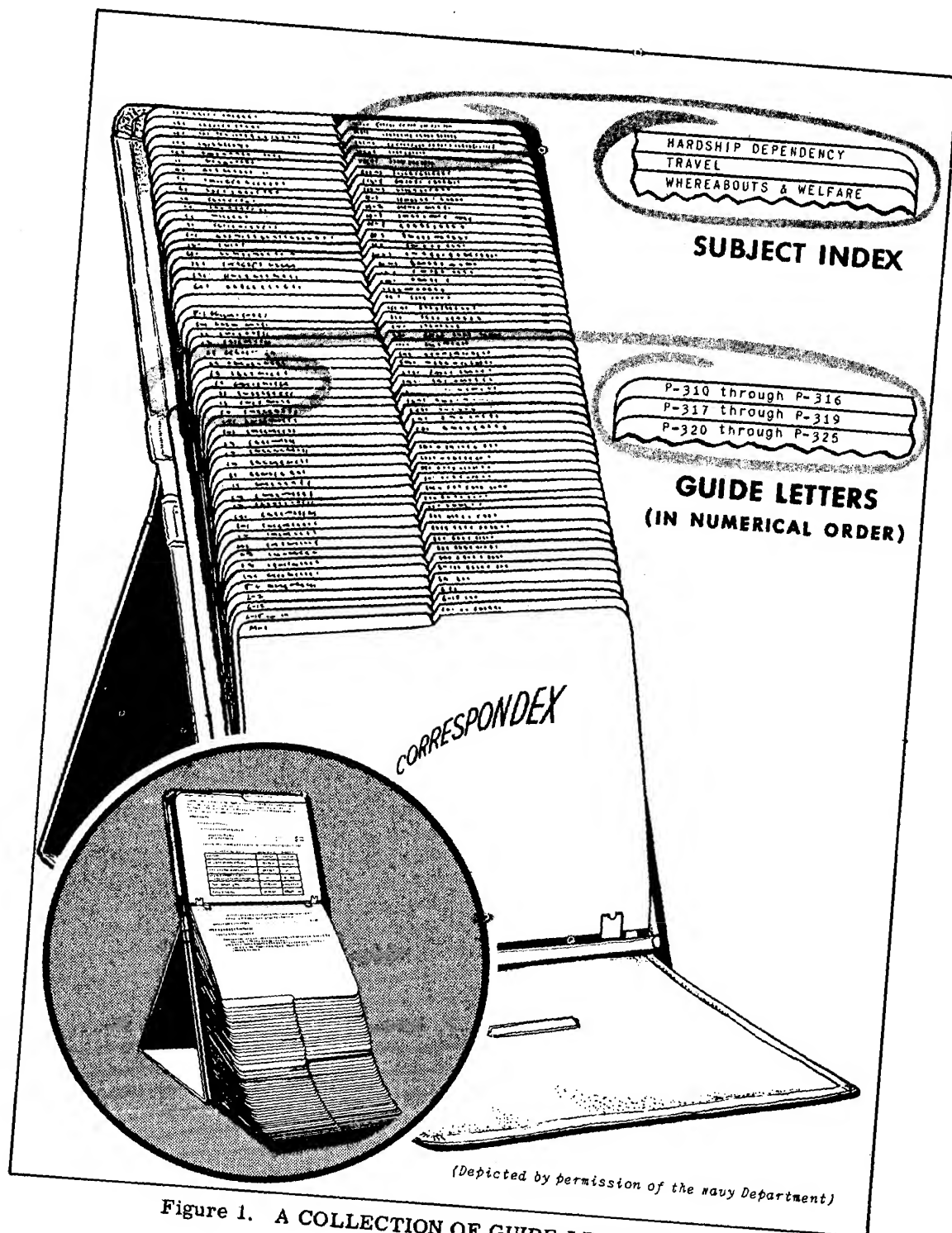
(Depicted by permission of the navy Department)

Figure 1.   A COLLECTION OF GUIDE LETTERS

I. WRITING LETTERS THE EASY WAY

IN THEORY

Management has a maxim that goes something like this:

In good organization functions and responsibilities are clearly defined.

By this principle we go to the office each morning knowing in advance what our work will be like. By the same principle it is also possible to know in advance what our office letters will be about.

A finance office does not recruit workers. A personnel office does not purchase supplies. If a letter about a purchase order goes to the Claims Division rather than the Procurement Division it may get lost. At best, everybody concerned gets hopping mad.

Without leaving our desks or without making a single telephone call we should be able to tell what office writes letters about salary checks or purchase orders or claims. We should be able to do this simply by reading a few organization charts.

Suppose we go on from there. We can see that each office writes letters on a limited number of subjects. We know generally what these letters are about. Why not find out specifically what they have to say? Why not make the letter-writing job easier by having more of our letters drafted in advance?

Most people will agree that this is a good theory. But to make the most of a theory we must have a way of putting it to work. That's where *guide letters* come in.

IN PRACTICE

Guide letters are drafted in advance of their actual use, but they are not printed. They are typed to look and read exactly like individually dictated letters. They are useful when printed letters are impractical or when typed letters are more appropriate than printed ones.

The method for developing and using guide letters which is explained here is being followed successfully by a number of Government offices. This book was written and placed in your hands to suggest how the same method can be adapted to meet the specific needs of your own agency. Whether you are a supervisor responsible for letterwriting, a secretary who answers most of her boss's mail, or a staff person with the job of simplifying paperwork - these suggestions may be helpful to you.

Follow us through this handbook and you will find out why and when guide letters are practical. You will also find a step-by-step account of how to go about packaging them in a handy desk file. But first, see for yourself how easy the letterwriting job can be once you have a large collection of guide letters. For example, look at the desk file pictured on the opposite page. Called a *Correspondex* it is exactly what the name suggests: an indexed collection of predrafted or guide letters. Now turn to the next page and see how the people who use this Correspondex have simplified their letterwriting jobs.

## LETTERWRITERS LOOK UP GUIDE LETTERS BY SUBJECT
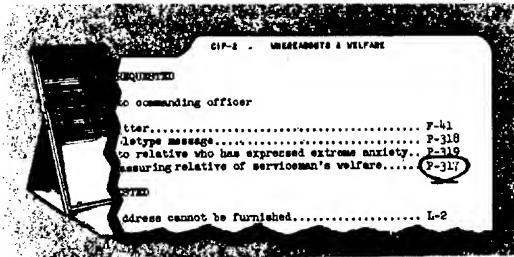
Instead of dictating replies, people who answer letters look in the subject index to get the numbers of appropriate guide letters for typists to copy. A letter to be answered is marked with the number of the guide-letter reply and handed to a typist.

TYPISTS LOOK UP GUIDE LETTERS BY NUMBER

Guide letters are printed in numerical order so a typist can find the ones assigned to her in a few seconds. Her Correspondex tells her how to set up each letter. She adds personal touches by typing in appropriate personal pronouns and names.
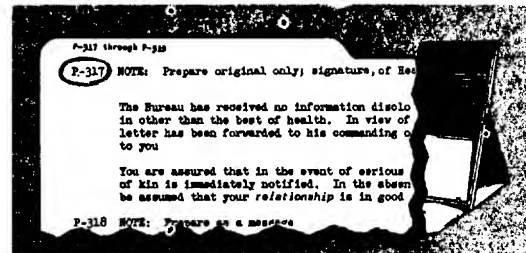
PEOPLE WHO SIGN LETTERS MAY REFER TO THE CORRESPONDEX TO MAKE SURE THE LETTERS ARE PROPERLY PREPARED
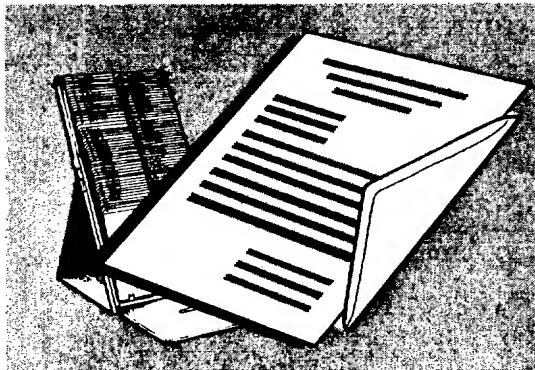
After a typist proofreads a letter copied from the Correspondex she sends it directly to the person who is to sign it. When signed and ready for mailing it looks and reads like an individually dictated letter.

(Depicted by permission of the Navy Department)

Figure 2.

WRITING LETTERS THE EASY WAY WITH CORRESPONDEX

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II. WHAT DO YOU GAIN FROM GUIDE LETTERS?

IN TIME AND MONEY

You can see that there is a profit in guide letters, but do you know what it is? Let's talk about it for a few minutes. First, let's size up the number of letters that flow from Federal typewriters. Estimated at one billion letters a year, this fantastic quantity of mail is more than most of us can possibly imagine.

A billion letters ready for mailing and stacked one on the other would reach 390 miles into the stratosphere, some 25 times higher than man has flown. If opened up and laid end to end they would circle the globe 5 times over. File away only one copy of each of them and you have added 333,000 cubic feet of records, 222,000 file drawers full!

Now let's try measuring the time it takes to get just one of these letters ready for mailing. How long, for instance, do you think it takes to prepare a typical 175-word dictated letter?

You say an expert letterwriter and an expert stenographer can turn out a 175-word letter in a total of 10 minutes? That may be true. But how many such experts do you know? We are thinking in terms of typical letters. We must also think in terms of letterwriters and stenographers with average skill.

The table on the next page (Figure 3) is based on studies of correspondence operations in a number of Government offices. It shows the typical sums of time spent by these offices in preparing typical 175-word letters. Notice how the minutes add up when the letter is dictated: a total of 25 to 29 minutes to prepare one typical letter! But replace the dictated letter with a guide letter and the preparation time is reduced to 9 minutes. In other words, you save 15 or 20 minutes in letter-planning and dictating time.

At today's wages 20 minutes in time spent on letters is worth at least 50 cents. Think what that means in terms of a billion letters a year. On how many of these letters can *you* save a half dollar?

IN BETTER LETTERS

But perhaps you are one of those people who are skeptical of so-called "canned" letters. Do you think that all letters must be individually dictated to be good? Then let's look at it this way: Say you spend an average of 10 minutes dictating a routine letter, which is as much time as most of us can afford. Now say you decide to cut out the dictation and prepare a guide letter. You know that you will use your guide letter over and over again, so you can afford to spend more time polishing it - say an hour. Can't you put a brighter polish on a letter in an hour than you can in 10 minutes?

Of course, you are right in thinking that guide letters are often useless or impractical. They are no help at all for those unusual or unforeseeable questions which are always plentiful enough to keep us in practice on our dictation. Moreover,

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when it comes to routine business correspondence, they are seldom as practical and economical as printed form letters. But don't let this fact mislead you. When printed letters fail because of variations in subject matter, guide letters can be turned out with endless combinations of paragraphs. When thumbs go down on printed letters because they are too impersonal, guide letters can supply that missing individual touch. And when a letter is used infrequently (less than 10 times a month), a guide letter is almost certain to be more economical than a printed one.

Actually, guide letters pick up where form letters leave off. Like form letters, they assure management that uniform problems are handled uniformly and that those differences of opinion on how to write a letter, so often existing in the same office, are banished for once and for all!

TIME AND COST FACTORS IN CREATING A TYPICAL ONE-HALF PAGE, 175-WORD LETTER				
	Minutes Required			
Action	Steno Dictation	Machine Dictation	Guide (Correspondex-Type) Letters	Form Letters
Planning What to Say	10	10	0	0
Dictation	10	5	0	0
Looking up a Letter	0	0	2	1
Transcribing - Typing	7	8	6	1.5
Reviewing - Signing	2	2	1	.5
Total Minutes	29	25	9	3
Cost in Terms of Salary	$ .70 to $ 2.45	$ .60 to $ 2.25	$ .20 to $ .30	$ .08 to $ .15

Figure 3.

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III. WHO SHARES THE PROFITS?

Practically every office, small or large, stands to benefit from guide letters. In countless small offices stenographers keep on hand a few "sample" or "stock" paragraphs. When asked to write letters on familiar subjects like job applications or monthly reports, they can find the right samples in a matter of seconds. It's as simple as that.

Everybody knows, though, that the informal practices of small offices will not get the job done in offices that handle big volumes of mail. And while the big letter-writing offices — usually divisions or sections of an agency — are the ones that should benefit most of all from guide letters, they oftentimes don't. Lack of good guide-letter systems is holding up their share of the profits.

If you are a supervisor, your own office may be on the list of those that need a guide-letter system. You who hold a staff job, such as records officer or methods examiner, may also have some ideas on the subject. Why not be sure? Why not run a few simple tests like the three suggested below? These tests will help you decide where guide-letter systems, similar to Correspondex, should be developed.

1. VOLUME TEST

If an office writes 250 or more letters a week, here is a good place to start a guide-letter system.

Obviously, the more letters an office writes, the more repetitive subjects you are likely to find. And the more repetitive subjects there are, the brighter your prospects for reducing dictation. In deciding where to start, therefore, you should first make a volume test. If your prospective office writes fewer than 250 letters a week, you may then apply the second or third test.

2. PRODUCTION-RATE TEST

If the letter production rate is low, here may be a good place to start the new system, regardless of the letter volume.

A production rate of less than 25 letters a day for a full-time letterwriter may indicate unnecessary letter planning and dictation. For example two full-time letterwriters and two full-time stenographers turn out an average of 150 letters a week. This production rate is low. Why? Unnecessary letter planning and dictation?

3. MULTIPLE-UNIT TEST

If two or more offices in your agency have the same functions, count the letters written by each such office. If the total count is 250 or more letters a week, one of the offices may be a good place to start the new method.

Offices with the same functions are called on to write letters on the same subjects. Here you have the advantage of putting one system to work in several places.

For example, Section B in each of 12 regional offices adjudicates claims under the same law and regulations. Individually these sections write not more than 150 letters a week. But the total weekly volume in the 12 sections runs to 1700 with the chances of repetitive letters multiplied by 12. A system developed for one of these sections may be put to work in all 12 of them. That's good business and good Government.

These three tests will not give you absolute proof of the need for a guide-letter system, but they will give you some of the very best indications. So if you make a passing grade on any one of them, go on from there. Don't let people tell you that guide letters won't work; that the subjects are too varied, the letters too individual. Find out for yourself. Make a start. You need go only a few steps to know how successful you will be.

STANDARD FORM NO. 64

Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : All persons concerned with preparing   DATE: September 1, 1955
correspondence

FROM : Chief, Division - - - -

SUBJECT: Correspondence improvement project

1. To carry out your Division's program for correspondence improvement we must have some copies of your typewritten letters. We must also find out how often you use your form (printed) letters.

2. For the period beginning - - - - and ending - - - - each stenographer and typist is requested to:

    a. Make one extra copy of all typewritten letters and memorandums, except those classified as secret or confidential. Mark the extra copy in the upper right corner to show how many <u>other</u> copies you were required to make of that particular letter. Do not include the extra copy or the original in your count.

    b. Keep a record of the number of times you use each form (printed) letter.

3. At the end of the period, the usage count on form letters and the carbon copies of typewritten letters will be turned over to the supervisors. The supervisor will:

    a. Note on a sample copy of each form letter (1) the total number of times it was used during the two-week period, as reported by the typists and stenographers, and (2) the number of copies, other than the original, that is required to be prepared.

    b. Bundle the sample form letters with the copies of the typewritten letters, and deliver the bundle to - - - -.

Figure 4. MEMORANDUM REQUESTING COPIES OF LETTERS

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IV. DEVELOPING A GUIDE-LETTER SYSTEM

You do not need to be an expert in correspondence management to develop a guide-letter system. If you know a good letter when you see one, and if you respect precision - that trademark of all good craftsmanship - you can develop a system as well as the experts. You can do it by following these seven steps:

Step 1. *Collecting*. Have one extra copy made of each typed letter and memorandum. Collect the copies long enough to get a fair sampling.

Step 2. *Sorting*. Make up a short list of "key" subjects like the principal subjects in a filing system. Sort the collection of copies accordingly.

Step 3. *Inventorying*. Take one key subject at a time and list the repetitive letters by their specific topics.

Step 4. *Organizing*. Take the topics from the inventory, and make an index to the letters.

Step 5. *Drafting*. Take the repetitive letters on each topic, and draft guide-letters or paragraphs to replace them.

Step 6. *Testing*. Find out how well the guide letters work by trying them out in actual practice.

Step 7. *Packaging*. Put the guide letters together in a compact desk file where they can be easily found and followed.

In the next paragraphs you will be given some pointers on how to take these seven steps. The best place to take them is within the office where the system will be installed. Let the people there know what you are doing and why. Invite and encourage their suggestions. If possible, have some of them take an active part in the project. Their participation is not only helpful; it is also your best insurance against lack of interest in the system once it has been installed.

Step 1. COLLECTING

Have one extra copy made of each typed letter and memorandum. Collect the copies long enough to get a fair sampling.

For best results, make your request for copies in writing. With a memorandum like the one on the opposite page, everyone will understand exactly what to do. Notice that the memorandum asks for a count of the number of times each form (printed) letter is used, as well as for copies of typed letters and memorandums. This is always advisable in an office where a form letter improvement program has not been conducted recently. *

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*See Records Management Handbook: Managing Correspondence—*Form Letters* (General Services Administration 1954).

The number of weeks required to get a fair sampling will depend on the average weekly volume of letters. The following time table was drawn up on the advice of those who have developed successful guide-letter systems:

Weekly letter volume	Collection time
Up to 250 letters	6 weeks
250 to 500 letters	5 weeks
500 to 750 letters	4 weeks
750 to 1000 letters	3 weeks
1000 letters or more	2 weeks

The table provides for collecting copies of letters for at least two weeks, no matter how great the volume of mail. That much time is always needed, our advisers tell us, to get a fair sampling of the *variety* of the subject matter. A longer collection period for smaller volumes is recommended to make sure that you get a fair sampling of *repetitive* subjects.

We talked about *the multiple-unit test*, remember? Don't forget those multiple units when collecting copies of letters. Although the system is developed in only one section, copies of letters should be collected from all sections having the same functions.

Step 2. SORTING

Make up a short list of "key" subjects like the principal subjects in a filing system. Sort the collection of copies accordingly.

A key subject describes a group of letters about related matters. In a Correspondex, key subjects are visibly indexed. They reveal what the letters in each section are about. That's why we call them *key* subjects.

For good examples, suppose we take the key subjects *Bills* and *Refunds* (Figure 5) that appear in a Correspondex used by one office of the Internal Revenue Service. Suppose that particular Correspondex did not even exist and that you had the job of developing one like it. And suppose you were at the same point we have now reached, and that you have a big pile of letters ready to be sorted. Do you see what you would have to do? You would have to sort into one pile all the letters you find about *Bills* and into another pile all those about *Refunds*. Similarly, you would have to place other letters in stacks according to their key subjects.

Obviously when you start sorting your own collection you may not know exactly what your key subjects will finally be. All you need for the time being, however, is a good working list - say not more than 20 subjects. Ask yourself the question, "What are these letters about, generally speaking?" If you know the answer you can easily make your own list of key subjects. Otherwise, ask the people in the office to help you. Keep in mind that this is a temporary list that can be revised later on.

Step 3. INVENTORYING

Take one key subject at a time and list the repetitive letters by their specific topics.

This is the stock-taking phase of the project. This is where you get proof as to whether the office will be in the guide-letter business on a large scale or a small one. The proof will come from the number and variety of repetitive subjects.

Letters or paragraphs need not be worded in the same way to be considered repetitive. They must have the same meaning, however. When two or more letters are alike in their entire meaning, count them as like letters. When two or more letters are alike with respect only to certain paragraphs, count them as like paragraphs. Do not count singles; that is, letters and paragraphs that do not recur. Put them aside for the present.

An inventory sheet, similar to the one in Figure 6, is a handy device for taking stock. Here's how to use it:

Make a separate inventory of each key subject. Write the key subject at the top of the inventory sheet.

As soon as you run across a repetitive letter or paragraph, list the topic. Give each topic a number. For example, give the number "1" to the first topic, the number "2" to the next, and so on. Write the number alongside the topic on the inventory sheet. Also write it on the face of each letter on that topic.

Whenever a repetitive letter or paragraph shows up, mark it with the topic number and tally it on the inventory sheet.

To get a complete picture of the correspondence, include the form letters. Add topics for them when necessary. Identify them by their numbers, and record how often they were used as shown on the sample copies.

Keep together all letters identified by the same topic number. You will need them in this arrangement when you come to step 5.

After each key subject has been inventoried, you know exactly how you stand. The future course of your project - 4 steps more - is fully charted.

Figure 5. KEY SUBJECTS VISIBLY INDEXED

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Each topic is given a topic number. Letters are marked with the numbers identifying their topics.

A count is kept of the number of letters or paragraphs written on each topic.

Key Subject __ *Refunds* ____

Topic No.	Topic	Paragraphs	Letters Typed	Form
1	Reply to question re amt of refund - amt. correct. Tax-payer made math error		＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ III	
2	Request to complete "non-receipt" statement	＃＃＃ I		
3	Ack'ment of inquiries about delay in rec'ing refund checks			293
4	Request for return of check issued in erroneous amount		III	
5	Request for form 1310 when check returned undelivered — Taxpayer deceased.		＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ II	
6	Additional amount due; explanation of recomputation		＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ ＃＃＃ II	
7	How to obtain refund of taxes paid on less than $ 600		＃＃＃ IIII	
8	Explanation that refund was credited to estimated (ES) tax (reply to complaint that refund was not rec'd)		III	
9	How to file Form 843 to claim refund		IIII	
10	Explanation that amount of refund is correct in accord-ance with return as filed		(continued)	19

Figure 6. INVENTORY SHEET

Step 4. ORGANIZING

Take the topics from the inventory and make an index to the letters.

It is now time to make a complete subject index. Actually, you have been heading this way from the minute you selected your key subjects.

A subject index is nothing more than divisions and subdivisions of the key subject; or, to put it another way, a logical organization of the topics listed on the inventory sheets. Imagine, for instance, an inventory sheet with 16 topics under the key subject *Refunds.* And imagine discovering that the letters covered by these 16 topics were written for 4 purposes: (1) to tell how refunds were computed, (2) to explain why refunds were not made, (3) to tell how to file for refund, and (4) to locate payees when refund checks are returned undelivered. With this discovery, you have hit upon the first division of the key subject.

Looking at the examples in Figure 7 you can see that subdivisions are developed in exactly the same way. You can also see that the last subdivision is the *specific topic* of the letter or paragraph. All others are simply *headings* that serve as guides in finding letters on specific topics.

But as easy as it seems, your subject index may turn out to plague you. Don't be fooled by your own satisfaction with it. There is always the chance that the people in the office have a different viewpoint on how letters should be classified. If their viewpoint conflicts with yours, adjustments must be made by regrouping the subjects or by providing adequate cross references.

When you are reasonably sure that the topics are grouped under headings where most people can find them, put some finishing touches on your index with these techniques:

Revise or refine the key subjects. Sharpen them until they are meaningful, arresting immediate attention. Whenever possible, express them in a word or two. For example, don't express a key subject as *Notices of payment due* when there is a meaningful little word like *Bills.*

Keep the index on each key subject to one typewritten page, 8" x 10-1/2" in size. If there is not enough space on one page, reclassify that subject making two key subjects out of it instead of one. The point is, you do not wish to make it necessary for people to look in more than one place for letters on one key subject.

Be consistent with format. Key subjects when visibly indexed are easier to read if typed in lower-case. Distinguish first divisions of the key subject by typing them at the margin in all capital letters. Set subdivisions off by double spacing and indentation.

After each specific topic, enter the topic number from the inventory sheet.

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Filing

Extension Of Time

General Information

Refunds

AMOUNTS OF REFUND CHECKS, REPLIES TO INQUIRIES RE

Additional amount due; recomputation explained FL-48

Correct amount was refunded

Based on return as filed. FL-135
Based on return after correction of taxpayer's math error FL-32

Erroneous check was issued

Return of check requested P-157
Repayment requested P-170

HOW TO FILE FOR REFUNDS, REPLIES TO INQUIRIES RE

Form 843 forwarded P-7

o filing due date) . . . FL-5
e wages less than $600). P-122A-B

Step 4. Sections of the subject index are typed on paper 8 x 10-1/2" in size. Topics are identified by temporary numbers.

Refunds

AMOUNTS OF REFUND CHECKS, REPLIES TO INQUIRIES RE

Additional amount due; recomputation explained........................... 6

Correct amount was refunded

Based on return as filed...10
Based on return after correction of taxpayer's math error.......... 1

Erroneous check was issued

Return of check requested.. 4
Repayment requested.. 16

HOW TO FILE FOR REFUNDS, REPLIES TO INQUIRIES RE

Form 843 forwarded... 9

Form 1040 forwarded

For use in filing amended return (prior to filing due date).......11
For use in filing original return (taxable wages less than $600)... 7

NONRECEIPT OF REFUND CHECKS, REPLIES TO INQUIRIES RE

Acknowledgment during filing period.................................... 3

Check issued; taxpayer requested to file nonreceipt form............... 2

Check not issued

Refund credited to ES as requested on return....................... 8
Refund not automatic (less than $1)................................ 12

REFUND CHECKS UNDELIVERED

Change of address indicated; identifying info requested................ 13

Certificate of signature

Requested from taxpayer.. 14
Received; forwarded to RDO; taxpayer notified...................... 15

Decedent case; Form 1310 requested..................................... 13

RE

. . . . FL-1
eceipt form FL-91

turn. FL-69
. . . . P-138

requested P-56

. . . . P-91
ified P-96

. . . . FL-96

Later, in Step 7, the subject index is transferred to a permanent reference file, such as the Correspondex. Temporary topic numbers are replaced by permanent ones.

Figure 7. TOPICS IN A SUBJECT INDEX

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Step 5. DRAFTING

Take the repetitive letters on each topic and draft guide letters or paragraphs to replace them.

Drafting letters that will do all that is expected of them is, beyond doubt, the most important part of your project. Before you begin, look over your inventory sheets to see whether any of the letters are used enough to justify form letters. Also decide whether the existing form letters are good ones. The Records Management Handbook, *Form Letters*, contains standards to help you make these decisions. At this point, therefore, you may wish to use that book hand-in-hand with this one.

While form letters are being printed there is usually ample time to draft guide letters and paragraphs that will be a source of pride to the office, as well as useful. It goes without saying that your drafts should be accurate as to facts, covering the topics as completely as need be. This requires the most careful analysis of all letters on each topic. That is why it was suggested, back in step 3, that you keep each group of letters together by topic number.

In addition to being accurate, your drafts should reflect the technique of a letter craftsman. Each of them should be an example of a good plain letter - easy to read and easy to understand. * When you have done your best, ready the drafts for use in these ways:

Head each draft (whether a paragraph or a complete letter) with instructions to typists on how to prepare it. Specify a minimum number of copies, or *no copies* when none is needed. If enclosures should accompany a letter prepared from the draft, specify what the enclosures are.

Identify *fill-ins*, that is, the blank places where the typist must put in words and phrases to complete the meaning.

If the letterwriters must supply the words for the typists, identify the blank spaces by numbers. Give the number "1" to the first blank space, "2" to the second, "3" to the third, and so on, in numerical order. Do this for each draft, beginning each time with "1". Example:

We have approved your application for a loan on your $ #1 ordinary life policy, effective #2 (date). A check for the amount of the loan, $ #3 will be sent to you by the Treasury Department.

If the typist can supply the missing words for herself the numbers may be omitted, as:

Your letter of (date) was referred to us by (Name).

---

*See Records Management Handbook: Managing Correspondence— *Plain Letters* (General Services Administration 1955).

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Use optional phrases, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs, whenever the analysis of the correspondence shows that optional parts will make a more useful guide letter. Identify options by alphabet letters as a means of letting typists know which one to use, as:

Please tell us
a. the names of the partners in your business.
b. the trade name under which you operate.

Temporarily, give each draft the topic number which identifies the letters it replaces. Because of the possibilities of deletions and additions in step 6 permanent numbers should not be assigned until the system is ready for installation.

Before you put your drafts aside, look over these three reminders - they may turn out to be worth more than all the other suggestions in this handbook put together:

1. *Have you questioned the need for each guide letter ?*

Be on the lookout for drones among your letters. For example, do you have a letter saying only that a form is enclosed? Or a letter explaining how to complete a form when the same instructions are on the form? Why not let the form speak for itself, thereby saving letterwriting expense ?
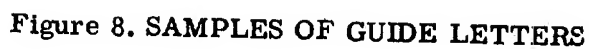
2. *Do you know the reason for writing the letters ?*

By reading between the lines you can often detect that the letters were set off by faulty procedures or inadequate program forms. And you may see how some of these faults and inadequacies can be corrected to improve office operations as well as to reduce letterwriting costs. The well known example is the second inquiry which is set off by delay in answering the first inquiry. You are hopeful, of course, that the guide-letter system will overcome this problem. But don't overlook the possibility of delays caused by complicated procedures that lurk in the background. Now is the time to investigate this possibility. The letters before you may be your evidence of the need to simplify a procedure.

The reason for writing letters to request such factual data as dates of birth, social security account numbers, names of next of kin, and so on, may be traced to an inadequate program form. You may block the flow of these letters by a simple addition to a form. Similarly, letters requesting information to correct improperly completed forms may be your evidence that the forms need simplifying.

3. *Do you need all of those file copies ?*

Extra copies of letters are so easy to make that we sometimes forget how much they add to filing costs. Very often there is no good reason for keeping any file copies of letters on routine informational matters. If you must keep an incoming letter, have it noted with the number of the guide letter reply and the date it was sent. By doing this you cut out the need for a copy of the reply.

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Guide Letters in Book
(Veterans Administration)

Guide Letters in Card Holders on Easel
(Internal Revenue Service)

Figure 8. SAMPLES OF GUIDE LETTERS

Step 6. TESTING

Find out how well the guide letters work by trying them out in actual practice.

When you come to step 6 you should have a complete subject index and a draft of every letter listed therein. You may not have a finished product, but you have one that is usable. So why not use it for a while on a test basis? Why not find out how it works before wrapping up the package?

The usual test runs for about two weeks or for the same length of time as the period during which copies of letters were collected in step 1. To run the test, give copies of the guide letters to several of the letterwriters and to the typists who type their letters. Also give the letterwriters copies of the subject index. Explain to them how the system works, as it was explained to you at the beginning of this book.

While the test is running have the letterwriters keep tab of their troubles in finding topics in the subject index and in making guide letters fit their requirements. Have the typists make extra copies of all letters that are still dictated.

If results of the test show that there is difficulty in finding topics, something may be amiss in the subject index. The troublesome topics may need reclassifying or cross indexing. If letters and paragraphs are poor fits, they need redrafting.

The most telling results of the test will come from the number of letters that are still dictated. Add these copies to the "singles" you put aside during your inventory (step 3). Then look through the combined lot for repetitive letters. If you find some, they should be captured and made part of the collection.

When you have taken step 6, you may wish to pause and run up your score. How many guide letters and paragraphs do you have? How many form letters? How many lines of straight typing are there in each? According to your inventory, how many times a year do you estimate that each of these ready-made letters will be used?

If you know the answers to these questions, you can estimate your savings with the help of the table in Part V of the Records Management Handbook, *Form Letters*, Figure your savings. And be sure to let the boss know what the score is.

Step 7. PACKAGING

Put the guide letters together in a compact desk file where they can be easily found and followed.

First of all, give the letters and paragraphs permanent numbers to replace the topic numbers in the index and on the drafts. Form letters should be given the same numbers that are printed on them. Guide letters may be distinguished by a code, such as the letter "P" standing for *pattern*. A number is then used to identify the specific guide letter or paragraph, as P-17.

Most people agree that the simplest numbering system is the best. The simplest system, of course, is a straight numerical sequence beginning with the num-

ber "1". When a letter is added later on, all you have to do is pick up the next number in the sequence.

A desk easel, similar to the Correspondex pictured in Figures 1 and 2, is a favorite package for guide letters. With these easels it is easier for letterwriters and typists to handle a large collection of letters and paragraphs. On the other hand, when the collection is small the time and expense involved in setting up the easel are not justified.

(This suggests that your problems should be over if you have a small collection. Put your collection in a binder in numerical order, prefaced with the index. Add a few tabs, if need be, and you have an acceptable package.)

The easels in use in Government are 9 inches wide and 17 to 21 inches high. They stand upright at a 55 degree angle; or they may be folded and put away when not in use. They come two ways:
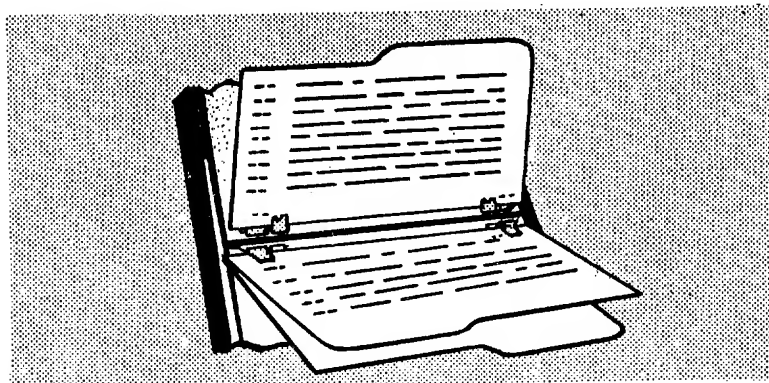

Equipped with tab cards (one-half cut) 6" x 8", hinged on the easel, two together, 1/4 or 1/8 of an inch apart. Easels thus equipped provide space for at least 108 pages of copy.

Figure 9.

Equipped with pockets to hold a paper 8" x 5-1/4" in size, or one-half the size of a page of Government paper. Easels thus equipped have only half as much copy space as those equipped with cards. They have the advantage, though, of being easier to set up and keep up.
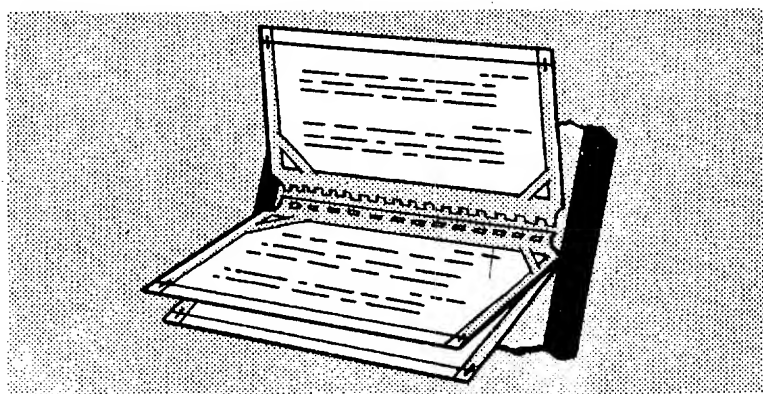

Figure 10.

Whether an easel is equipped with cards or pockets, it is visibly indexed. The subject index is usually at the top of the easel with key subjects visible. The letters follow with letter numbers visible.

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In setting up an easel file, consider that the easel is made up of sections, each section introduced by a visible subject. Consider a section to be the face of an upright card (or card pocket) and the back of the next one. Consider that each section will hold one full page of copy, 8" by 10-1/2". Do you see, now, why it was suggested in step 4 that you keep one key subject to one page?

Make the best possible use of your space. Figure that you can have no more pages of copy than you have cards or card pockets. Figure, too, on leaving a few sections for expansion. Some offices save space by omitting form letters and exhibiting them in a separate folder. Other offices omit the subject index from the easel and put it into a book like the one exhibited in Figure 11. Books with the subject index are used by letterwriters, and easels with letters only are used by typists.

Since guide-letter systems are custom built from start to finish you can make any changes or adaptations that will best suit your individual needs.
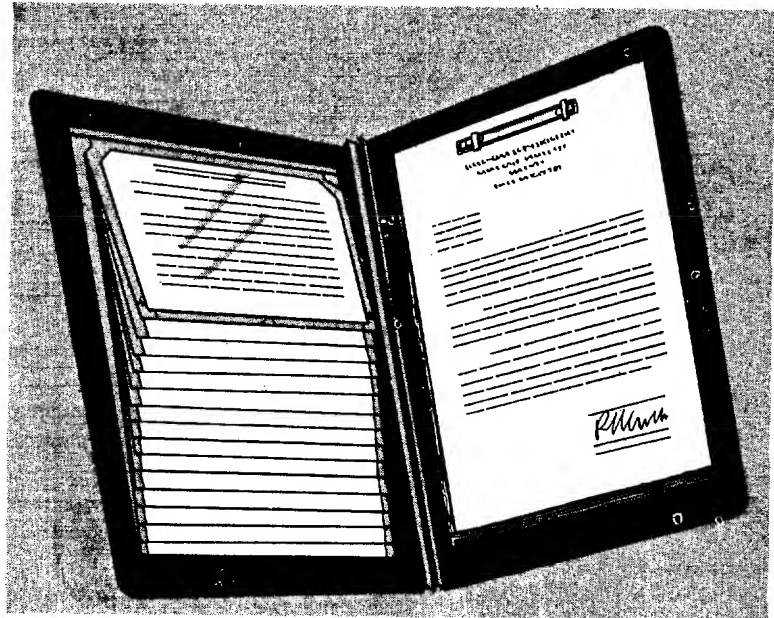

Figure 11.

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V. PUTTING GUIDE LETTERS TO WORK

No matter how good a guide-letter system is, it will not operate smoothly and profitably without adequate supplies and adequate training. What's more, it will bog down completely without the endorsement of the officials responsible for the letters and the cooperation of the people who use them. Don't let this happen to your guide-letter system. As a preventive, follow these suggestions:

Set an installation date on which the new system will begin to operate. Announce the date well in advance.

See that there are enough letter files (Correspondexes) for each letterwriter, typist, and reviewer to have one of his own. If new form letters are being introduced at the same time, see that they are printed and on hand before the installation date.

Design and have printed some work sheets similar to the one exhibited in Figure 12. Letterwriters often need these work sheets to let typists know what guide letters to write and what fill-ins or other adjustments to make in them.

Plan a simple work procedure and put it in writing. The simplest procedure keeps letters moving straight ahead toward the outgoing mail box. Like the procedure illustrated in Figure 2 it provides that the work shall flow from the letterwriter to the typist and from the typist directly to the person who is to sign and mail the letters. It also provides that an incoming letter shall go from the letterwriter to the typist with a notation of the number of the guide-letter reply; or, that a work sheet shall be used when there is no incoming letter or when the guide-letter calls for fill-ins that the letterwriter must supply. If necessary the work sheet may be kept as a substitute for a file copy or as a tickler file. Otherwise, it is disposed of when the letter is mailed.

Conduct training classes for the people who will use the letters. Explain the purpose of the new system and why it is being started. Show how the letter file is indexed. Using actual examples, show how to find letters in the index and how to assign them to typists either by a notation on an incoming letter or by using a work sheet. Finally, make it clear that everybody using the guide stands to profit, both by saving money for the Government and by increasing his own efficiency.

Announce who will be responsible for keeping the guide letters up to date. Give that person the opportunity to assist in the installation activities.

Design a simple form for work reporting to be prepared weekly, every two weeks or once each month. The report should call for figures showing how many manhours were spent on letters by both letterwriters and typists. It should also call for figures on the number of letters produced by each group, broken down by form letters, guide letters, and dictated letters. The information from these reports will show how effective the guide-letter system is. It will also help management develop performance standards and balance workloads and personnel.

Finally, ask the official responsible for the subject matter to introduce the new system with his endorsement and his appeal for its full utilization.

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CORRESPONDENCE GUIDE WORK SHEET	DATE	IDENTIFYING NO.
	CORRESPONDENCE SYMBOL	

	STENOGRAPHIC OR TYPING UNIT		NAME OR INITIALS	
TO		FROM		
			UNIT OR ROOM NO.	

INSTRUCTIONS—Prepare correspondence as indicated below:

FORM LETTER NO.	PATTERN LETTER NO.
FL.	P.

FILL-INS

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.

REMARKS

☐ OVER

Figure 12. CORRESPONDENCE WORK SHEET

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VI. KEEPING GUIDE LETTERS ACTIVE

With changes in laws, regulations, and procedures, come changes in letters. These changes *must* be made. With experience in using guide letters come ideas for editorial changes that will improve their quality. These changes *should* be made.

We shall assume that you followed the suggestion in the last chapter and had one person in the office designated as the person who will be responsible for keeping the guide letters up-to-date. If this person - let's call him or her a correspondence analyst - goes about the job haphazardly your project may be doomed to failure. The successful analyst follows a carefully laid plan for keeping guide letters active and for progressively improving them. It's your job to help lay out the plan.

The plan can be as simple and easy to follow as this:

Put the analyst on the mailing list to receive copies of all new or changed laws, regulations, policies, and procedures affecting the work of the office. Make sure that he will get advance information whenever it is available. Give him the responsibility of determining whether the changes affect the existing letters or raise a need for new ones. Let him see to it that dead letters are thrown out and that additions and replacements are ready when needed.

Set up a regular schedule for spot checking the mail by having the analyst read the incoming as well as the outgoing letters. In offices writing a large volume of letters, one or two days a month should be set aside for spot checking. This is one way of telling whether more guide letters are needed, particularly for replying to inquiries. This is also one of the ways to tell how guide letters can be improved.

Periodically - say twice a year when the mail is heavy - let the work sheets accumulate for several weeks. Have the analyst look them over for hand-written notes from letter writers to typists instructing them to change the wording of guide letters. These notes may reveal the need for permanent changes.

Establish a regular routine by which the analyst and the letterwriters will exchange ideas about letters. The routine may call for a formal memorandum from a letterwriter to the analyst suggesting improvements, or for occasional informal group meetings in which the analyst leads the discussion on ways and means for improvement.

Completely overhaul the collection of guide letters and form letters at least every two years. Have the analyst collect copies of letters just as you did in step 1 of Part IV. Have him analyze the letters to find out how the existing collection can be improved by changes, additions, or deletions.

One final word about those multiple units mentioned in Part III: If you are supplying them with a collection of guide letters you may want to include them in your plan for keeping the letters active. If the units are scattered in field offices throughout the country (as is likely), coordinated instructions on changes would logically originate in the central office. In any event the details of coordination

must be carefully worked out with the central office officials responsible for the subject matter.

Perhaps you have a better plan for keeping good guide letters flowing off the production line. If so, be sure to use it. After all, the goal of correspondence management is the same as the goal in any other field of production management. The goal is a good product by the simplest and most economical means!

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GUIDE-LETTER CHECKLIST

The answer "NO" to any of the following questions may indicate that better use can be made of guide letters.

		YES	NO
1.	Do you know when guide letters are more practical or more suitable then form (printed) letters?	☐	☐
2.	Have you analyzed your correspondence to find out whether you can use more guide letters?	☐	☐
3.	Do letterwriters and typists find and follow guide letters easily?	☐	☐
4.	Are your guide letters easy to read and easy to understand, reflecting the virtues of good plain letters?	☐	☐
5.	Are there written instructions to letterwriters on how to assign guide letters to typists?	☐	☐
6.	Do typists have a collection of guide letters with complete instructions on how to set up each letter, including instructions on copy making and enclosures?	☐	☐
7.	When guide letters are prepared does the work flow straight ahead from letterwriter to typist to the person who signs and mails the letters?	☐	☐
8.	Have you urged letterwriters to question the need for writing letters?	☐	☐
9.	Can you justify extra copies of letters?	☐	☐
10.	When a letter is answered with a guide (or form) letter, is the number of the reply letter noted on the inquiry to take the place of a file copy?	☐	☐
11.	Have you looked into the possibility of cutting down on the amount of letterwriting by improving your program forms?	☐	☐
12.	Are you measuring your correspondence workload and counting its cost?	☐	☐
13.	Do you follow a systematic plan for keeping guide letters active and for progressively improving them?	☐	☐
14.	Do you periodically overhaul your guide-letter system?	☐	☐

Washington: 1955